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Civilisation or Barbarism

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Chapter 17 [excerpt]:

Does an African Philosophy Exist?

The Egyptian Contribution to World Philosophical Thought



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In the classical sense of the term, a philosophical thought must bear out at least two fundamental criteria:

1. It must be conscious of itself, of its own existence, as a thought.
2. It must have accomplished, to a sufficient degree, the separation of myth from concept.

Through examples given below, we will see how difficult it is sometimes to apply the latter criterion, even to the classical Greek philosophy. Before evaluating the extent to which the African conceptual universe respected these two principles, let us delimit first, with precision, the cultural area to which our analysis applies. It includes Pharaonic Egypt and the rest of Black Africa.

Vis-à-vis Black Africa, Egypt has played the same role that the Greco-Latin civilization has played vis-à-vis the West. A European specialist, in any domain of the humanities, would be ill advised to conduct any scientific work if he cut himself off from the Greco-Latin past. Similarly, the African cultural facts will only find their profound meaning and their coherence in reference to Egypt. We can build a body of disciplines in the humanities only by legitimizing and by systematizing the return to Egypt: in the course of this account, we will see that only the Egyptian facts allow us to find, here and there, the common denominator of the remnants of thought, a connection between the African cosmogonies in the process of fossilization.

Because Egyptian philosophical thought sheds a new light on that of Black Africa, and even on that of Greece, “the cradle” of classical philosophy, it is important to summarize it first, in order to bring better into focus, subsequently, its often unsuspected articulations, in other words, its loans. This manner of presenting the facts, by respecting the chronology of their genesis and their true historical connections, is the most scientific way of retracing the evolution of philosophical thought and of characterizing its African variant.

Egyptian Cosmogony

Egyptian “cosmogony” as summarized here is the one attested to by the texts of the pyramids (2600 B.C.), so that we may stick to sure facts, meaning, to the epoch

when even the Greeks did not exist in history yet, and when the Chinese and the Hindu philosophies were meaningless.

One can distinguish three great systems of thought in Egypt that tried to explain the origin of the universe and the appearance of all that is: the *Hermopolitan* system, the *Heliopolitan* system, the *Memphite* system, and to this can be added the *Theban* system.

The summary below condenses the essentials of these four doctrines, but it is rigorously faithful to the Egyptian texts; it is not a tendentious interpretation.

According to these systems, the universe was not created *ex nihilo*, on a given day; but there always existed an uncreated matter, without a beginning or an end (the *apeiron*, without limit and without determination, of Anaximander, Hesiod, etc.); this chaotic matter was, in origin, the equivalent on non-being, because of the sole act that it was unorganised: thus, non-being is not, here, the equivalent of nothingness, from which would rise, no one knows how, the matter that would be the substance of the universe. This chaotic matter, contained at the archetypal state (Plato) all the essences of the body of the future beings that, one day, would be called into existence: sky, stars, earth, air, fire, animals, plants, human beings, etc. This primordial matter, the *nous*, or the “primordial waters,” was elevated to the level of divinity (called *Nun* in Egyptian cosmogeny). Thus, from the start, each principle of explanation of the universe is doubled by the divinity, and as philosophical thought developed in Egypt, and more particularly in Greece (materialistic school), the latter replaced the former.

Primitive matter also contained the law of transformation, the principle of the evolution of matter through time, equally considered as a divinity: *Khepera*. It is the law of becoming that, acting on matter through time, will actualize the archetypes, the essences, the beings who are therefore already created in potentiality, before being created in actuality. (Thus Plato’s “the Same and the Other”) the theory of reminiscence, etc.; and Aristotle’s matter and privation, potentiality and actuality, etc.).

Thus, carried by its own evolutionary movement, eternal matter, uncreated, by dint of going through the stages of organization, ends up by becoming self-aware. The first consciousness thus emerges from the primordial *Nun*; it is God, Ra, the demiurge (Plato) who is going to complete creation.

Up to this point, the Egyptian “cosmogony” is materialistic in essence; for it is professing a materialistic faith when postulating the existence of an uncreated eternal matter, excluding nothingness and containing its own principle of evolution

as an intrinsic property. This materialistic component of Egyptian thought will prevail among the Greek and Latin Atomists: Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius.

But with the appearance of the demiurge, Ra, Egyptian cosmogony takes a new direction with the introduction of an idealist component: Ra achieves creation through the word (Islam and Judeo-Christian religions), the *logos* (Heraclitus), the spirit (the objective idealism of Hegel).

As soon as Ra conceives beings, they emerge into existence. There is therefore an obvious, objective relation between the spirit and things. The real is necessarily rational, intelligible, because it is spirit; therefore the spirit can perceive external nature. Ra is the first God, the first demiurge of history who created through the word. All other gods in history came after him, and there exists a demonstrable historical relation between Ra's word, the *Ka* – or the universal reason that is present everywhere in the universe, and in every thing – and the *logos* of Greek philosophy or the Word of the revealed religion.

“The objective idea” of Hegel in nothing but the word (of Ra) of God, without God, a mythicised version of the Judeo-Christian religion, as Engels remarked.

Then, Ra creates the four divine pairs, according to Heliopolitan cosmogony:

1. *Shu* and *Tefnut* – air (space) and humidity (water)
2. *Geb* and *Nut* – earth and heaven (light, fire)

In these first two pairs are found the four elements that make up the universe of the Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Anaxagoras), namely air, water, earth, fire; even Plato will still adopt them.

3. *Osiris* and *Isis*: the fertile human couple that will beget humanity (Adam, Eve).
4. *Seth* and *Nephthys*: the sterile couple that will introduce evil into human history; there is no notion of original sin here; evil is introduced by men, not by women; there is no pessimism, nor misogyny, typical of Aryan-Semitic nomad societies.

In conclusion, an idealistic (or spiritualistic) component is introduced into Egyptian cosmogony with the appearance of the demiurge Ra, and it is the basis for the concepts of the Greek idealist school (Plato, Aristotle).

Finally, a third component of Egyptian cosmogony is, historically speaking, at the origin of the revealed religion (the Judeo-Christian in particular).

In fact Ra is, in the history of religious thought, the first God, autogenous (who was not created, who has neither father nor mother).

On the other hand Seth, jealous because he is sterile, kills his brother Osiris (who symbolises vegetation, from the discovery of agriculture to the Neolithic period). The latter rises from the dead to save humanity (from famine!). Osiris is the god of redemption.

In any case, Osiris is the god who, three thousand years before Christ, dies and rises from the dead to save men. He is humanity's god of redemption; he ascends to heaven to sit at the right hand of his father, the great god, Ra. He is the son of God. In the *Book of the Dead*, it is said fifteen hundred years before Christ: "This is the flesh itself of Osiris." Dionysus, Osiris's replica in the northern Mediterranean, will say five hundred years before Christ: "Drink, this is my blood; eat, this is my flesh." And we can see how the degradation of these types of beliefs can lead to the notion of the sorcerer who eats people in Black Africa.

Egyptian cosmogony also states: "I was one; I became three"; this notion of trinity permeates all of Egyptian religious thought and is found again in the multiple divine triads such as Osiris-Isis-Horus, or Ra, in the morning, at noon, at night.

The term "Christ" is not an Indo-European root. It came from the Pharaonic Egyptian expression *kher sesheta*: "he who watches over the mysteries," and was applied to the divinities, Osiris, Anubis, etc. It was applied to Jesus only in the fourth century, by religious contamination.

A ray from heaven descends upon the heifer (symbol of Hathor), who then "begets" the god Apis: without any possible doubt this is the prefiguration of the immaculate conception of the Blessed Virgin.

Conception of the Being. According to Egyptian thought, the being is composed of three principles (Plato, Aristotle), to which a fourth one can be added: the shadow.

1. the *Zed* or *Khet*, which decomposes after death
2. the *Ba*, which is the body's corporeal soul (the "double" of the body throughout Black Africa)
3. the being's shadow
4. the *Ka* = immortal principle that rejoins the divinity in heaven after death. Thus was founded, on the ontological level, the being's immortality (three thousand years before the birth of the revealed religions). Each person possesses a portion of the divinity that fills the cosmos and renders it

intelligible to the spirit. Perhaps it is on these grounds that the Egyptian cosmogony makes God say “that he made man in his own image.”

Lastly, let us say that the Hermopolitan ogdoad is specifically composed of four divine pairs representing the opposing principles of nature that are supposed to be at the origin of things:

<i>Kuk and Kuket</i>	=	the primordial darkness and its opposite: darkness and light.
<i>Nun and Nunet</i>	=	the primordial waters and their opposite: matter and nothingness.
<i>Heh and Hehet</i>	=	spatial infinity and its opposite: the infinite and the finite, the unlimited and the limited.
<i>Amon and Amonet</i>	=	the hidden and the visible, the noumenon and the phenomenon.
<i>Niaou and Niaouet</i>	=	emptiness and its opposite: the void and the replete, matter (later).

One can see how the universe can be constructed from these notions, which will also become the basis of Western philosophy and particularly of dialectical thought.

One can measure, from this account which only scratches the surface of this subject, all that Greek philosophy owes to the Egyptian thought of the Nile Valley's Blacks: Heraclitus's theory of opposites, Aristotle's dialectics . . . the diverse cosmogenies of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, etc.

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